Kumar Amit (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-1025-1335)
Epley Nicholas (Orcid ID: 0000-0003-2722-9799)

Undersociality,
Running Head: Undersociality

Understanding undersociality:

intentions, impressions, and interactions

Amit Kumar[a] & Nicholas Epley[b]

[a]*University of Texas at Austin* [b]*University of Chicago*

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amit Kumar, University of Texas at Austin, 2110 Speedway, B6700, Austin, TX 78712. E-mail: Amit.Kumar@mccombs.utexas.edu

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Abstract

Ratner, Kim, and Wu (2023) and Silver and Small (2023) raise deeply interesting questions about the broad consequences of increasing sociality, about people's ability to anticipate the outcomes of sociality, and about broader issues people may be considering when thinking of connecting with another person. We focus this response on the potential role of intentions and anticipated impressions in affecting undersociality, as well as the possibility of interactions that could moderate the gap between people's expectations of social engagement and their actual experiences. Many unanswered and important questions remain in need of critical empirical attention. We encourage future research that provides a better understanding of undersociality by focusing on intentions, impressions, and interactions.

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In the spirit of avoiding undersociality, we want to open by sincerely thanking Ratner, Kim, and Wu (2023), and Silver and Small (2023), and for taking time to think so seriously about our target article. Both commentaries raise important questions for future research in this area, in consumer behavior and beyond. We (Kumar & Epley, 2023) reviewed what might be considered the first generation of research examining the extent to which expectations about social interactions might be systematically miscalibrated in ways that discourage social engagement. This first generation has documented robust main effects and suggested potential mechanisms. Both commentaries charted what the next generation of research on undersociality needs to consider, including moderators of miscalibrated expectations and interesting extensions. Here, we identify three areas of overlap that we think are especially important to pursue: intentions, impressions, and interactions.

Intentions: Self-Care or Other-Care?

Ratner and colleagues (2023) raise the broader issue of how to enhance one's own wellbeing—that is, how to engage in "self-care"—noting that "a consumer who seeks to improve her wellbeing might wonder: What is the appropriate mix of other-oriented versus self-oriented consumption?" We note that a consumer who seeks wellbeing in this way may not experience as much of a boost in wellbeing from connecting with others as those who are trying to connect with others without focusing on "self-care." Existing research suggests that other-oriented behavior increases one's own wellbeing indirectly, by achieving basic human goals of relational connection, competency, and autonomy (Dunn, et al., 2014). Connecting with others therefore feels good to the extent that it creates a sense of connection with another person, fulfills the goal

of positively affecting another person, and/or gives people a sense of effective agency. The degree to which a social action satisfies those goals should therefore moderate how positive they make a person feel, and possibly also moderate the degree to which people's expectations are calibrated with their experience. The goal-directed nature of sociality helps to explain why recalling an act of kindness makes people feel better when it is motivated by other-oriented goals than when it is motivated by self-oriented goals (Wiwad & Aknin, 2017; see also Nelson et al., 2016; Regan et al., 2022). A wise consumer would not attempt to engage with others at all opportunities, but rather would keep an eye out for sincere opportunities in which they could easily enhance another's wellbeing, as such activities are not only likely to have a surprisingly positive impact on others but increase one's own wellbeing as well. The evidence we reviewed does not identify what the appropriate balance of other-oriented versus self-oriented activities is, but rather suggests that miscalibrated expectations may lead people to tip the balance of their own choices more in the favor of self-oriented choices than might be considered optimal for their own wellbeing.

In addition to affecting people's own experience of sociality, both commentaries also led us to consider two additional ways in which people's intentions for engaging with others may affect their social experiences. First, people's intentions may be most likely to affect their interest in engaging with others to begin with, in ways that might lead to undersociality and thereby result in people missing out on some positive social experiences. The data we reviewed suggests that people who are deliberately trying to increase their own wellbeing may be steered away from connecting with others at least partly because people underestimate how positively connecting with others will actually make them feel. The data we reviewed does not, however,

examine how actively trying to increase one's own happiness might affect people's interest in social interactions.

Second, people's intentions may affect how positively others respond to one's own sociality in a way that affects the outcomes of a social interaction. It is worth noting that the experiments we reviewed that document unexpectedly positive outcomes of social engagement have come in cases with sincere prosocial intent, as the basic research interest is in trying to understand psychological barriers that might keep people from acting on social intentions. A compliment can certainly be insincere, as Silver and Small (2023) point out, but existing research has not examined how variance in a prosocial actor's intentions might affect a recipient's experience. For instance, participants in our research on expressions of gratitude (Kumar & Epley, 2018; see also Epley, Kumar, et al., in press) wrote genuine letters to people they felt a deep appreciation towards. These expressions were therefore very sincere and thoughtful. To the extent that warmth is clearly not present in a social act—if the expression is impersonal or if people instead wrote pro forma thank you notes that seem obviously insincere to recipients—then we would expect recipients to respond less positively. If those expressing gratitude undervalue the impact of expressing warmth to a recipient, then people might not underestimate how positively others respond to clearly disingenuous prosocial actions. Examining the impact of a person's motives and intentions on both social expectations *and* social experiences is a critical topic for future research.

Impressions: Communication as a Cure?

Consistent with Silver and Small's (2023) suggestions, we believe there are meaningful connections between the research we reviewed and research examining impression management and reputation signaling. We think systematic misunderstandings about the minds of others are

what create barriers to social engagement, including underestimating others' interest in talking (Epley & Schroeder, 2014) or having meaningful conversations (Kardas, Kumar, & Epley, 2022), as well as underestimating others' positive emotions following a prosocial action (Kumar & Epley, 2018, in press; Zhao & Epley, 2021a). In addition to these, Silver and Small (2023) also suggest that actors may consider whether their behavior could convey negative signals to others, such as lacking competence. We agree wholeheartedly with this possibility, and document how misplaced concerns about competency can create barriers to expressing gratitude, sharing compliments, and providing social support (Dungan, et al., 2022; Kumar & Epley, 2018; Zhao & Epley 2021a; see also Boothby et al., 2018; Boothby & Bohns, 2021). Not only are actors likely to be thinking more about their own competency than recipients are (who are more likely to be attending to signals of another person's warmth; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, et al., 2007; Wojciszke, 1994), they are also likely to think they are being evaluated less positively in terms of their competency than they actually are (Boothby et al., 2018; Dungan et al., 2022; Kumar & Epley, 2018).

These results are interesting to consider in light of recent research reviewed by Ratner and colleagues (2023), contending that a shared experience can be distracting and potentially less enjoyable because of the attention devoted to what an interaction partner is thinking (Wu, et al. 2021). This anxiety may well be misplaced. Indeed, Wu et al. (2021) find that social interventions such as simply having a brief conversation about interests and preferences with one's partner before engaging in a shared activity together can increase clarity about any concerns to the point that these thoughts no longer have a negative effect on an otherwise rewarding shared experience. The remedy for uncertainty about another's interests or preferences could be as simple as talking to them about it rather than ruminating about it (Eyal,

et al., 2018). In addition, although it is not one of the main results reported by Wu et al. (2021), these authors also find that such a discussion with a partner is easier than people expect. This finding is consistent with people's general tendency to underestimate a variety of positive outcomes of conversation, especially with strangers (Atir, et al., 2022; Boothby et al., 2018; Kardas, Kumar, & Epley, 2022; Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021). Ratner et al. (2023) correctly note that consumers may not always have a close social tie to partake in an activity with them, but we suggest that a misplaced reluctance to reach out to a stranger or relatively weak tie may keep people from using more readily available sources of wellbeing.

We also agree wholeheartedly with Silver and Small's (2023) effort to connect emerging research on undersociality with the broader concept of utility. What is not known at this point is what specific expectations people are spontaneously bringing to mind while deciding whether to approach or avoid another person in a social exchange, or even the extent to which people are actually thinking through the outcomes of a social interaction before they engage in one. Existing research measures people's expectations along dimensions that researchers provide to them, which are guided by theories of what people might be thinking about, and also require people to think through the outcomes of an interaction. We encourage researchers to consider adopting a more bottom-up approach that examines in more detail what thoughts people are spontaneously considering before engaging in a social interaction, including concerns about one's reputation, or potential tradeoffs people may be imagining between different goals (such as working while commuting vs. socializing; see Epley & Schroeder, 2014 for data suggesting that commuters report benefiting from sociality without being less productive when doing so).

Whatever these precise concerns turn out to be, one remedy for calibrating people's expectations is already quite clear: increasing the amount of actual experience in social

interaction in order to receive better feedback (Epley, Kardas, et al., 2022). In one very ambitious experiment (Sandstrom, et al., 2022), those encouraged over the course of a week to engage in conversations with strangers through a scavenger hunt game reported more positive experiences than those who were not encouraged to do so in the game. Across the week, people randomly assigned to engage more often with strangers became more optimistic about their competency, were more calibrated when predicting the outcomes of conversations, and were more interested in talking with strangers more often in the future.

Interactions: Under-Altruism and Bowling Alone?

As we noted in in our target article, the next phase of research on undersociality will surely focus on moderators of the gap between people's expectations and their experiences in social interaction. As Silver and Small (2023) mention, it would be interesting to extend such investigations to the domain of charitable giving. Although some research already suggests that charitable giving is linked to one's own wellbeing (e.g., Dunn, et al., 2008), note that much charitable giving happens anonymously or at some meaningful psychological distance, and may not involve any direct social interaction with recipients. To the extent that the positive experience of connecting with others comes through the basic goal of establishing relational connection, giving money to charity may not actually feel as positive as other forms of prosocial exchange that involve dyadic interaction or a stronger sense of connection between the giver and receiver (Grant, et al., 2007). Examining how expectations and experiences covary with the degree to which a charitable act satisfies basic goals of relational connection or competency would be a very interesting and important program of research.

Those interested in understanding the consequences of charitable giving can also test Ratner et al.'s (2023) suggestion that the positive impact of prosociality will be inversely related

to the cost of giving in terms of time, money, or effort. Presumably there is a tipping point at which giving to others becomes sacrificial rather than beneficial to one's own wellbeing. As Ratner et al. (2023) intuit, spending some money on others may be positive but spending all of your money on others would surely be less positive, and we expect most decision makers would intuit this as well. Our hypothesis is not that giving more necessarily leads people to feel better, but rather that people may fail to appreciate how positive giving may make others feel, leading people to be overly reluctant to engage in acts of kindness that they might otherwise want to perform (Kumar & Epley, in press), such as helping in ways that their means would allow.

Ratner and colleagues (2023) wisely note that some solitary experiences can be pleasurable, too, as any academic who enjoys reading alone can readily attest. In one interesting experiment, Ratner and Hamilton (2015) even found that a solitary experience can be more positive than expected. In this experiment, people expected that spending five minutes walking through an art exhibit would be more enjoyable with a partner than alone, but their actual experience did not differ with a partner versus alone, meaning that people only significantly underestimated how much they would enjoy walking through the exhibit alone. This raises the broader question about what, exactly, people's expectations might be attending to versus missing in either solitary or social experiences. In the case of social experiences, such as starting a conversation, people seem to expect that others will not respond as positively to a friendly (or warm) outreach than others actually do. What they are missing from the actual experience is how engaging—and hence enjoyable—it will actually be. We suspect this same broader mechanism could be at work with solitary experiences as well. The difference between enjoyable solitary experiences and dull, lonely ones seems likely to be the experience of engagement in given situation. A conversation with someone who is disengaged would be

unpleasant, just as walking through a boring art exhibit would not be very pleasant. Failing to appreciate how cognitively engaging, and thus positive, certain solitary activities might be could lead to miscalibrated expectations about their enjoyment in a way that actually mimics what is observed in expectations of social interactions. We look forward to future research that considers how psychological mechanisms that guide expectations about social interactions may also be playing a similar, or possibly distinct, role on solitary experiences.

We believe the key comparison for identifying instances of undersociality is the gap between expectations of social interactions and actual experiences. Avoiding social engagement in these cases is what we think people themselves would consider to be unwise. It can be easy to imagine moderators of this gap, but we have found it somewhat surprising ourselves just how robust the surprisingly positive consequences of social engagement seem to be for people's wellbeing. For instance, it is easy to imagine that the benefits of reaching out and engaging with others would be a more positive experience for some than for others. Extraverts, for example, would presumably be made happier by engaging in an outgoing fashion, and might even be energized by it, while introverts may not be, and might instead be happier acting in a more introverted way.

As intuitive as this may be, existing research simply does not confirm it. Over the course of a given day, people tend to feel happier when they are acting extraverted than when acting introverted regardless of their reported level of extraversion, and both short laboratory sessions and weeks-long field experiments consistently find that people are happier when instructed to act extraverted than when asked to act introverted, again regardless of their reported level of extraversion (as long as they are following experimental instructions; Regan et al., 2022). Even when extraverts and introverts do differ in their enjoyment of a social interaction, such as in a

large group conversation, people across the extraversion spectrum may underestimate their enjoyment to a similar degree (Duffy et al., 2018).

Similarly, Ratner et al. (2023) note that there may be cases when social engagement leads to burnout rather than enhanced wellbeing. This prediction seems intuitively plausible, but the cited paper from Scheffer and colleagues (2022) to support it actually examines how people's *expectations* of burnout or compassion fatigue can discourage people from engaging in contexts when compassion might be required. The evidence we reviewed suggests that avoiding compassion in these cases could be mistaken, but we do not know because actual experience was not measured here. We encourage researchers to test the boundary conditions of undersociality, being especially cognizant to examine both social expectations and social experiences.

Finally, we agree with both Ratner et al. (2023) and Silver and Small (2023) that existing research has largely compared social expectations against experience in one-shot exchanges, and longer interactions with others would be worth studying in future research. It is still unknown whether the patterns we have observed in dyadic exchanges, largely conducted at a single time point, extend to different social contexts or generalize across repeated social exchanges. However, our initial evidence suggests that avoiding undersociality may have some lasting consequences. In one set of experiments, participants delivered multiple compliments to the same person over the course of a week and the results suggested that kind words do not necessarily become tired words (Zhao & Epley, 2021b). Recent work also suggests that people expect that enjoyment from sociality will decline over time, but their actual experiences reflect a different reality: enjoyment was either consistent or increased as conversations continued, rather than decreasing (Kardas, Schroeder, & O'Brien, 2022). It is through repeated interaction that strangers can become friends, support each other in times of need, help when necessary, and

create the sense of social connection that reduces stress and improves health. In the short run, undersociality could lead people to miss out on a surprisingly positive experience. In the long run, undersociality could have far more significant outcomes. Undersociality might also stand in the way of further prosocial acts, given the downstream behavioral consequence of kindness spreading after people perform random acts of kindness for others (Kumar & Epley, in press). We look forward to learning more about how engaging with others impacts both immediate experience as well long-term outcomes, compared to expectations about these outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts

Our review outlined an emerging line of research suggesting a robust tendency for people to underestimate the positive outcomes of engaging with others, a misunderstanding that we believe could lead people to be overly avoidant in their daily lives and result in them missing out on some social experiences that would increase their wellbeing—and potentially support their health. Ratner et al. (2023) and Silver and Small (2023) were right to note that our research raises more questions than it currently answers, and we are hopeful that this is a topic of study that is coming to the field of consumer behavior rather than one that is going. We are excited about what we have yet to learn about the nuances of undersociality, and fully expect that the collaborative process of research to learn it will not only be positive for many people, but could even be surprisingly positive.

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